

### **“But I Like You”: Childhood, Puppetry, and the Queerly Innocent Friendship of Bert and Ernie**

When a gay *Sesame Street* writer revealed that he based his characterizations of Bert and Ernie on himself and his partner, Sesame Workshop released their standard denial: “Bert and Ernie are best friends . . . they remain puppets and do not have a sexual orientation.” On Twitter, Frank Oz, Bert’s original performer, claimed the authority of creative parentage in clarifying that the characters were not gay. Yet, Bert and Ernie, like so many queer children, seem to defy their parent’s preferences in their interactions with audiences and their participation in a set of performance traditions that construct their subjectivities as malleable, much like the foam and fleece of which they are constructed.

Sesame Workshop’s insistence on the innocence of puppets—as objects lacking sexual agency—is powerless to stem the queer potential of Bert, Ernie, and the children they presumably resemble. Their cohabitation and marriage-like quarreling remain stubbornly legible as queer, reinforced by performance traditions related to puppetry, the homoerotic subtexts of male comedy duos, and the double entendres of *Tin Pan Alley Song*. Protectionist and developmental discourses are deployed on each side of the controversy, with some claiming that innocent children and puppets are being sexualized by perverted adults, and others that the pure goodness of puppets can teach tolerance and diversity. By attending to the constructions of childhood and puppetry as simultaneously innocent and queer, this paper seeks to take seriously the often acknowledged but seldom analyzed relationships between children and puppets in performance.